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### Review of Women as Translators in Early Modern England, by Deborah Uman

Judith Bailey Slagle

East Tennessee State University, [slagle@etsu.edu](mailto:slagle@etsu.edu)

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## Review of Women as Translators in Early Modern England, by Deborah Uman

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## BOOK REVIEWS



Deborah Uman. *Women as Translators in Early Modern England*.  
Newark: University of Delaware Press, 2012. 166 pages. \$65.00.

**Reviewed by Judith Bailey Slagle**

In *Women as Translators in Early Modern England*, Deborah Uman considers how translation, often deemed “uninspired or menial,” elicited a prefatory “defense” from most early women translators, implying that the act of translation was a secondary activity and sometimes an almost invisible practice—even as it offered a feminist theory of translation (3–5). Even with educational disadvantages, early women writers were translating from classical as well as from contemporary language texts. Uman’s goal, she explains, is to show how translation, often a “gendered activity,” gave women entry into the literary cultures of the Renaissance through the Restoration. Focusing on women translators, Uman seeks to “broaden our understanding of the potential of translation and to reevaluate women’s work within the context of the English literary Renaissance” (3). Organizing the book principally by genre, her intention is to demonstrate how women translators represented themselves in their works as trends in women’s writing progressed, a goal that she accomplishes effectively.

Translation has long been a respected scholarly task, and early women translators found safety, first, in translating works by men and, second, in sometimes couching their social and political agendas in their translated texts. Uman’s first chapter emphasizes gender and translation, focusing on writer-translators such as Margaret Tyler and Aphra Behn, who not only “point out their gender” in their prefaces, but also “highlight their exclusion from male forms of writing” (9). Citing theorists that include Jacques Derrida, George Steiner, and Walter Benjamin, who mark the “supplemental and post-Babelian condition of translation” (7), Uman then turns to feminist critics who find these theorists guilty of applying negative associations to translation. Based on the assumption that it is possible to abstract the meaning of a text from its

original form to reproduce that meaning in the very different form of a second language, translation theory is complex. Uman suggests that women translators, however, successfully entered fields that were often thought inappropriate for them, especially the classics. Women translators repeatedly reflected their anxiety about such prejudices in their prefaces, apologizing (whether sincerely or not) for their foray into this male-dominated field. They routinely address their problematic roles as female translators and “highlight their exclusion from male forms of writing in ways that color the reader’s experience of what is undeniably then a woman’s text” (9). Comparisons of modern translations by men and women, Uman explains, often support the French feminist assessment of women’s relationship to the “symbolic realm” and to the language of the body—an often-conflicting view with the goals of translation. Uman finds that determining the implications of gender for translation is problematic as well, for the number of translations by women is still significantly fewer than those by men. Rather than trying to compare men’s and women’s translations, Uman attempts to analyze the context of women’s translations, which were often influenced by their authors’ educational experiences. Behn, especially, laments women’s lack of educational preparation for such work and apologizes for her lack of expertise in French, Latin, and Greek. Women knew that placing themselves in this public sphere made them targets for criticism, and their “public” (translation) voice left them vulnerable—much like being on the stage, also Behn’s venue. Uman’s introductory chapter effectively outlines her method and intent, at the same time connecting critical theory and translation theory to her goal of analyzing the primary texts in the discussions that follow.

Chapter 2, “Defending Translation,” turns to a discussion of how women writers defended their translation work in the early modern period, examining primarily Margaret Tyler and, again, Behn as examples of women who chose the translation of secular works rather than religious ones (like those translated by Anne Vaughn Lock and the Cooke sisters, for example), placing those women in the masculine public sphere. Tyler’s introductory material for her translation of Diego Ortuñez de Calahorra’s *The Mirroure of Princely Deedes and Knighthood* anticipates an audience critical of a romance translation and asks why, since so many romances are dedicated to women, a woman should not write her own. While both women translators affect a certain amount of humility in their prefaces, Tyler does not apologize for choosing a Spanish tale originating in a Catholic country; instead she offers her readers the first Spanish romance translated into English during a time when British citizens still

remembered the unfortunate reign of Mary Tudor and her consort Philip of Spain. Tyler's translation, Uman explains, is faithful to the original text and presents a logical justification for entering into the male-dominated literary world. Grounding her argument in the context of sixteenth- and seventeenth-century history, Uman captures her readers' interest in a text with which they may not be familiar.

Behn's "Essay on Translated Prose," discussed in chapter 2, also begins with a demonstration of the translator's humility, which is once again a defense of a woman's ability to embark on male literary territory. Both Tyler and Behn, Uman argues, present proto-feminist works that appropriate "the language of inferiority while simultaneously challenging the secondary status of translation and of women" (18). Defending her native English language, Behn discusses the difficulty of translating French into English, meanwhile underscoring her skill at translating a language "hardest to translate into English" (19). This is a savvy move for Behn, who had earlier garnered support from Dryden, an expert translator himself, for her translation of Ovid's *Epistle of Oenone to Paris* for Dryden's *Ovid's Epistles* in 1680. With this grounding in classical and French translation, Behn established herself as an authority for future translation work, including her 1685 *Seneca Unmasqued; or, Moral Reflections*, discussed in Uman's section on "Defending Women's Knowledge."

In chapter 3, "Echoing Eve: Sacred Imitations and the Tradition of Women's Poetry," Uman moves from narrative translations to religious poetry, focusing on Anne Vaughan Lock's project of translating Calvin's sermons, Mary Sidney Herbert's translation of the Psalms of David, and Aemilia Lanyer's *Salve Deus Rex Judaeorum* as examples. Religious translations were widely sanctioned by humanist educators, Uman explains, in the hope that "such exercises would lead female students down the path of virtue and obedience" (41). Lock's translation of Calvin's political yet lyrical and allegorical sermons results in a collection of English sonnets (based on Psalm 51) entitled "A Meditation of a Penitent Sinner." Like many other women translators, Lock diminishes her own authority by informing readers that the meditation was given to her by a friend who thought she might publish it, thus distancing herself from the poems and making the translation appear less personal. The sonnets, however, Uman writes, are "intricately crafted, and Lock has broken new ground by putting together a sonnet sequence (not to mention a *religious* sonnet sequence) in English" (51). Herbert, on the other hand, admired for her learning, does not apologize for her translations of the Psalms, originally begun by her

brother. Her strong voice deals with masculine themes as she manages to connect to the role of women and to the creative mother, while emphasizing the importance of collaboration in the writing/translating process.

What Uman sees as a friction between private and public voice is resolved, she believes, in Lanyer's poetry. Lanyer addresses women's education and celebrates the "potential for communities of female readers and learners" (59), taking on her own role in the translation of teacher and poet. Lanyer praises Herbert as she apologizes for her own inadequate education, but she also questions women's alleged inferiority in her preface. Her revision of Genesis and Matthew places the wife of Pontius Pilate at the forefront as she defends Eve in an argument to spare Jesus. Known as Eve's apology, Lanyer's version emphasizes the danger in keeping women from knowledge as Pilate's wife becomes a "second Eve" in presenting a "literal or literary Christ within the lines of her poem" (63).

Moving away from the religious translations discussed in chapter 3, Uman takes up the works of Jane Lumley, Katherine Philips and, again, Herbert in chapter 4, "Staging Translation," where Uman discusses their translations of plays about ancient Greece and Rome. This particular genre and ancient setting showed the translators' interest in political ideology as well as in performance. Greek and Roman stories and plays often "originate with the violation of a woman" (73), and they probably appealed to the translators, first, as women and, second, as victims of their own national crisis in gender and patriotism, Uman explains. She begins the chapter with a summarizing account of the first women to write plays, some of them designed for intimate spaces—later called, sometimes incorrectly, "closet dramas."

Lumley's *Iphigeneia*, translated from Greek, was a remarkable project, Uman argues, even for a classically trained woman. This translation reveals Lumley's interest in women's education and in their public recognition while it also emphasizes their subjugation. Agamemnon keeps his daughter's fate from her, emphasizing her lack of knowledge—women are uninformed. The translation is also somewhat personal, Uman explains, as Lumley's father may have used her reputation "to shore up his reputation among his men" (76), for the publication of Lumley's translation is used to assert her family's prestige. The translation, however, shows a lack of faithfulness to the original text (what Dryden would call "imitation") but furthers Lumley's feminist agenda—educating women. Herbert's faithful translation of Robert Garnier's *Antonius* also furthers that agenda while it concentrates on Cleopatra's political as well as linguistic skill. Herbert's character Cleopatra controls the representation

of self, much as the translator does through her female object. Herbert also participates in the “lyric movement embraced by so many of her male contemporaries” (82), placing her in a public sphere traditionally unfriendly to women. Finally, Philips’s translations of *Pompey* and *Horace* turn to the importance of friendship in the context of a war that pits family and friends against each other. More than Herbert’s Cleopatra, Philips’s character in *Pompey* is “liberated” from history’s role as “harlot queen” (90) as Philips showcases her truly noble spirit. Issues of gender and nationalism, Uman argues, are easily applied to seventeenth-century English concerns through Philips’s translation, and Britain is celebrated through association with its heroic past. Sharing a common knowledge of history and politics, both Behn and Philips strive to interact with their audience.

Uman’s final chapter, “Embodying the Translatress,” turns yet again to Behn, for Behn is one of the best examples of how a woman translator used her prefaces to address women’s roles as female translators and to highlight their exclusion from male forms of writing. In 1680, Behn tried her hand at translating the classics with Ovid’s *Epistle of Oenone to Paris*, a poem possibly assigned her by Dryden for inclusion in *Ovid’s Epistles, Translated by Several Hands*. Her translation of the erotic text was authentic enough to garner praise from Dryden, no small accomplishment. In Behn’s later “Essay on Translated Prose,” the preface to Fontenelle’s *Entretiens sur La Pluralité* (titled by Behn as *A Discovery of New Worlds*), Uman writes, Behn also takes the opportunity to demonstrate her knowledge and use it to undermine common assumptions about women’s limited intelligence and capabilities; and she does so without the usual rhetoric of humility employed by most women writers.

Overall, Uman’s *Women as Translators* is an accessible and valuable work for teachers and students interested in a history of women translators in particular or simply in early women writers in general. (Uman’s list of references is impressive as well.) Her knowledge of a wide historical range of texts makes the book useful as it deals with an area of early women’s scholarship that has garnered little attention. Uman does rely heavily and somewhat unevenly on Behn, but Behn’s translation oeuvre emerges as varied and ambitious. And while Uman’s comparisons between translation and original texts are sometimes cumbersome, she examines texts unfamiliar to most readers—texts that require, therefore, a certain amount of summarization. Ultimately, none of the women translators who followed in the nineteenth century, including Germaine [Necker] de Staël, Margaret Holford Hodson, Lucy Aikin, Lady Dacre

(Barbarina Brand), Harriet Martineau, Elizabeth Barrett Browning, George Eliot, and others, could have produced their translated works without these earlier models. Uman's literary and linguistic work is important to the study of early modern culture and literature because it emphasizes the contribution these women made to the field of translation while it provides an historical foundation for theories of translation that would follow.

Philip Ball. *Curiosity: How Science Became Interested in Everything*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2012. viii+ 465 pages. \$25.25.

Reviewed by Jacob Stegenga

The historical period often referred to as the Scientific Revolution brought about a change in the practices and evaluation of curiosity. Philip Ball's *Curiosity: How Science Became Interested in Everything* is a study of the vicissitudes of curiosity during the Scientific Revolution. The first several chapters place practices of curiosity, and the way they are expressed and transformed during the Scientific Revolution, in their cultural context: chapter 2 focuses on secret societies dedicated to the study of mysterious phenomena, chapter 3 discusses the wealthy collectors of curiosities, and chapter 5 notes the emergence of polymath academics. Middle chapters highlight extraordinary seventeenth-century scientific and technological advances, including Galileo's defense of heliocentrism with his telescope (chapter 7), Boyle's experiments with his air-pump (chapter 9), and Hooke's detailed depictions of the microscopic world (chapter 10). Final chapters explore social, literary, and philosophical critiques of scientific curiosity, and discuss present-day scientific projects, such as the Large Hadron Collider and the Mars Rover, aptly named *Curiosity*.

What is curiosity? Ball notes that the term *curiosity* is polysemous—the multiple meanings of the term are made salient in his study of the shift in the way curiosity is expressed, institutionalized, and judged as a trait worthy or wicked. The mode of curiosity as *wonder*—as collecting curious items, as exploring mysterious phenomena in a secret society, and as the display of strange feats for courtly patrons—is more prominent in the early stages of the Scientific Revolution, Ball argues. Such wondrous curiosity becomes denigrated as the Scientific Revolution takes hold, during which the mode of curiosity as *inquiry* becomes more dominant—the systematic observation of nature, often with